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ABSTRACT

School districts across the country are facing increasing numbers of secondary immigrant students who have low level English or native language skills, and in many cases, have had limited formal education in their native countries. These students must learn English, take the required content courses, and catch up to their native-English-speaking peers before high school graduation. How are schools meeting the needs of these students, many of whom are placed below the expected grade level for their age? This digest reports on data collected through a study of secondary newcomer programs, sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement as part of the Center for Education, Diversity, & Excellence. It answers the following questions: (1) "Who are the newcomer students?"; (2) "Where are the programs located?"; (3) "How are newcomer programs designed?"; (4) "How do newcomer programs address students' language learning and academic needs?"; (5) "How do newcomer programs address students' acculturation process?"; and (6) "How do newcomer students make the transition out of the program?"

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Secondary Newcomer Programs: Helping Recent Immigrants Prepare for School Success

by Deborah J. Short

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ERIC® CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
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Digest

March 1998
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Secondary Newcomer Programs: Helping Recent Immigrants Prepare for School Success

Deborah J. Short, Center for Applied Linguistics

Many school districts are facing increasing numbers of secondary immigrant students who have low level English or native language skills and, in many cases, have had limited formal education in their native countries. These students must learn English, take the required content courses, and catch up to their native-English-speaking peers before high school graduation. How are schools meeting the needs of these students, many of whom are placed below the expected grade level for their age?

Some districts have developed newcomer programs that serve these students through a program of intensive language development and academic and cultural orientation, for a limited period of time (usually from 6-18 months), before placing them in the regular school language support and academic programs. The rationale for establishing these programs differs across sites, but many programs were set up for one or more of the following reasons:

- Students were at risk of educational failure or of dropping out of school.
- Students were over age for their grade level placement, because of weak academic skills and limited formal education.
- Students' needs surpassed the instructional design of the regular ESL or bilingual program that was in place in the district.
- Students had low or no English or native language literacy skills.

This digest reports on data collected through a study of secondary newcomer programs, sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education as part of the Center for Education, Diversity & Excellence. It introduces the common factors and range of practices found in secondary newcomer programs across the United States. The information is drawn from program profiles found in *Secondary Newcomer Programs in the United States: 1996-97 Directory* (Short & Boyson, 1997).

Who Are the Newcomer Students?

Secondary programs vary in their definitions of newcomers, but most include recent arrival to either the United States or the school district and limited English proficiency as characteristics. Over half of the programs surveyed for the study also noted that students are below grade level or have limited formal education. Some programs rely on a definition associated with federal aid: students who have been in the United States for 3 years or less and are limited English proficient. Almost a third of the programs restrict enrollment to students who have been in the United States for one year or less.

Newcomer students at the secondary level range in age from 10 to 22 years and come from many language backgrounds. Most of the newcomers speak Spanish, but native speakers of many other languages, including Mandarin, Pilipino, Russian, Haitian Creole, Polish, Punjabi, Vietnamese, and Hindi, attend these programs as well. In fact, over half of the programs enroll students from four or more different native language backgrounds.

The number of students served by the newcomer programs ranges from 14 at one site in Connecticut to over 740 at a high school in New York City. Almost half of the programs enroll 50 or more students, and 12 programs serve over 200 students. Because of limited resources, not all newcomer programs are able to serve all eligible students in the district.

Where Are the Programs Located?

Newcomer programs are located in 18 states; most of these have high rates of immigration, such as New York, California, and New Jersey. Over three fourths of the programs are in urban-metropolitan settings; the rest are in suburban areas and rural locales. More than half of the programs operate at the high school level. About one third serve the middle school level, and the remainder offer a combination of middle and high school services. Most of the schools draw from several attendance areas in one school district.

Most newcomer programs are designed as a separate program within a regular secondary school. This is usually the home school (i.e., the school in their designated attendance area) of most, if not all, of the newcomer students. The students may participate in some school activities outside of the program, such as physical education and art. Upon exiting the newcomer program, many students remain at the same school to continue their studies in the regular language support program, which may offer English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual services. Students from outside the attendance area may return to their home schools or go to other schools in the same district.

Twelve of the programs surveyed are not located in a regular school. Three are full-length high schools, where students enter in the ninth grade and generally remain in the program until graduation. Two programs are located at district intake centers, where language minority students are assessed and placed. For those designated as newcomers, these intake centers offer special, short-term courses before the students enter one of the schools in the district. In some districts, one newcomer center has been established at a centralized site to serve, for example, all eligible middle school students.

How Are Newcomer Programs Designed?

Program designs differ according to educational goals, site options, staff availability, and resource allocation. Most programs serve newcomer students for the full school day. This schedule provides time to offer several content area courses along with English language instruction. Other pro-

grams operate for a half day, sometimes to accommodate two groups of students at one site (e.g., middle school students in the morning, high school students in the afternoon) or to promote more interaction with the entire student body at the school. Two programs operate solely after school and students attend on a volunteer basis. Most of the programs are designed to educate students for one year, although some offer an additional summer program. Nineteen programs last more than one year; five for less than a year. One is a summer-only program. Most of the programs allow new students to enroll mid-year or mid-session if space is available.

The grade-level designation of newcomer students varies at different sites. One school, for instance, is designated as a ninth grade school. High school-aged students who enroll in the district with 8 years of schooling or less may opt to attend this school for a year. Afterwards, they move on to 10th grade in one of the other district high schools. Other high schools may serve all grade levels, assigning students as appropriate to their age and educational backgrounds. After one year, 9th and 10th grade students exit to attend other high schools. Eleventh grade students may elect to stay at the school to graduate.

How Do Newcomer Programs Address Students' Language Learning and Academic Needs?

The programs offer a range of instructional activities for students that reflect the goal of developing both language and academic skills so that students may enter the regular ESL or bilingual program, or in some cases, mainstream classes. Ninety-eight percent of the programs provide a course in English as a second language. Eighty percent offer sheltered content instruction, and 73% offer content instruction in at least one of the students' native languages. (Over 10 different languages are used for content area instruction.) Forty percent have courses in native language literacy. More than half of the programs offer both sheltered instruction and native language content instruction. In some of these sites, bilingual courses may be available for one or two high-incidence language groups, while sheltered instruction is offered to low-incidence language groups. Because a large number of the students have limited educational backgrounds, many of the content classes are designed to help students learn the basic foundations of core subjects. While about half of the programs also participate in Title I or provide special education services, less than one fourth give newcomer students access to gifted and talented support.

Newcomer programs usually employ experienced staff trained in second language acquisition theory, ESL and sheltered instruction methods, and cross-cultural communication. Usually at least one staff member in a program is bilingual. Staff attend professional development workshops that address specific needs for the newcomer student population, like developing literacy skills, so they can improve their curricula and instructional delivery. At a number of sites, native language instruction in the content areas is provided by bilingual paraprofessionals.

How Do Newcomer Programs Address Students' Acculturation Process?

One important characteristic of newcomer programs is the attention given to familiarizing students with their new environment: the school, educational expectations, the community, and the United States. Eighty-eight percent of the programs provide courses in cultural orientation to the United States. Many of the programs supplement their classroom curricula with field trips, cultural activities, and special events. Some provide career orientation as well.

Reaching beyond the students themselves, 43% of the programs offer classes to orient parents to the United States, and 63% offer adult ESL classes either through the program or the school district. All programs view parental involvement and communication with parents as high priorities. Some sites have a home-school liaison, and others maintain a community outreach component to share information about the program and to arrange partnerships with community organizations. Many either have social workers on site or provide assistance in helping students and their families access medical and social services in the community.

How Do Newcomer Students Make the Transition Out of the Program?

Many of the programs that are one year in length automatically exit students at the end of the school year. A number of programs test students for language proficiency (and some test content areas as well) to determine whether students are ready to participate in other programs offered on the district or school. However, most programs allow some degree of flexibility for individual students. In some programs, students who make fast progress can exit before the end of the program. For students who arrive in the second semester of the school year, who have large gaps in their educational backgrounds, and may be illiterate in their native languages, several programs accommodate their needs by extending their stay.

Newcomer programs ease the transition process in several ways. At some sites, the newcomer courses are part of a continuum of services in the language support program, and students move on to higher ESL levels or into bilingual classes. Some sites have students sit in on regular courses before they exit the newcomer program. Many sites provide orientation to the regular school program, take students on school tours, and have students talk with guidance counselors. Some also pair newcomers with more advanced ESL students. A number of sites continue to monitor the newcomer students' progress for 6 months to a year after they have exited the program and may offer tutorials and mentoring.

Conclusion

The newcomer directory will be updated each year through 2000, adding new programs as they become known to the researchers. In addition, case studies of selected sites will take place to further an understanding of how these programs serve recent immigrants.

Reference

Short, D.J., & Boyson, B. (1997). *Secondary Newcomer Programs in the United States: 1996-97 Directory. Washington,* DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

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